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Panel cuts covert aid to rebels

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WASHINGTON — The House Foreign Affairs Committee, dealing a blow to President Reagan's policies in Central America, voted yesterday to end all CIA-covert aid to Nicaraguan rebels.

Although Democratic sponsors of the aid cutoff conceded that it had no chance of becoming law, the administration quickly registered its dismay.

"As we stated before," said State Department spokesman Alan Romberg, "[we have a] basic opposition to any legislation that would constrain the executive's policy tools to deal with the extremely complex situation in Central America."

By a 20-14 vote that generally followed party lines, the committee approved a bill to replace the controversial covert aid to the anti-Sandinista rebels with an \$80 million overt program to interdict the flow of arms from Nicaragua to the leftist guerrillas in El Salvador.

The bill also would force the CIA to withdraw its support from the anti-Sandinista insurgents within a specified time. Intelligence sources said that could be as soon as 90 days after enactment, although the bill omits a specific reference to avoid giving the Sandinistas logistical information.

The vote capped a month of unsuccessful attempts by the committee to strike a compromise that would have permitted the CIA to continue providing a limited form of covert assistance.

One Republican, Rep. Jim Leach, a liberal from Iowa, joined the Democrats in voting for the bill. Florida Democrats Dante B. Fascell and Andy Ireland joined Republicans in voting against it. Two other Democrats, George W. Crockett Jr. of Michigan and Mervyn M. Dymally of California, abstained.

Rep. William S. Broomfield of Michigan, the committee's senior Republican, predicted "a different ball game entirely" when the bill went to the House floor. He said he would continue to seek a compromise to limit covert support without ending it entirely. Moderate Democrats also said they would continue to push for such a compromise.

Committee staff members said they doubted that the bill would come up for debate before July. Even if it passed the House, the measure would

face additional delays in the Republican-controlled Senate, where its chances are considered dismal.

"In other words," said Rep. Stephen J. Solarz (D., N.Y.), one of the 20 committee members who voted for the bill, "the CIA can continue its secret war against Nicaragua all this time, and maybe by the time we finish processing the bill here on Capitol Hill, the CIA forces will have taken Managua and ousted the Sandinistas, and all will be a moot point."

Adolfo Calero, a Miami-based civilian leader of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), the main group

of anti-Sandinista rebels fighting in northern Nicaragua, acknowledged in an interview that the delays favored their side.

"We think that by year's end or maybe in a few more months, our forces will have brought about a complete change in Nicaragua," said Calero, who, nonetheless, denied that FDN's primary objective was to overthrow the Sandipista government.

Calero said a complete cutoff of U.S. aid would severely affect the FDN but would probably not end its fight against the Sandinistas.

"I don't think we would collapse without U.S. support," he said. "However, we would be placed in a very, very difficult position. ... There would be a bloodbath in Nicaragua if our troops pull back."

As the committee was debating and voting on the measure, the government announced it was expelling 21 Nicaraguan diplomats and ordering six consular offices closed in retaliation for Nicaragua's ouster on Monday of three U.S. diplomats. Nicaragua charged that the three Americans were involved in a plot to assassinate its foreign minister.